

1991

# Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History

David R. Russell

*Iowa State University*, [drrussel@iastate.edu](mailto:drrussel@iastate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl\\_books](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_books)



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Russell, David R., "Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870-1990: A Curricular History" (1991). *English Books*. 4.  
[https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl\\_books/4](https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_books/4)

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Books by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [digirep@iastate.edu](mailto:digirep@iastate.edu).

# CONTENTS

---

Foreword	ix
<i>Elaine P. Maimon</i>	
Acknowledgments	xiii
I.	
The Triumph of Specialization	
1.	
Introduction	
<i>The Myth of Transience</i>	3
2.	
Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds	
<i>From the Liberal Curriculum to Mass Education</i>	35
3.	
Writing and the Ideal of Research	
<i>Some Tacit Traditions</i>	70
4.	
Writing and the Ideal of Utility	
<i>Composition for the Culture of Professionalism</i>	101

## CONTENTS

### II.

#### The Search for Community *Writing and General Education*

##### 5.

Writing and Social Efficiency  
*The Cooperation Movement* 135

##### 6.

Writing and the Great Books 166

##### 7.

Writing and Progressive Education 199

### III.

#### The Postwar Era

##### 8.

The Disciplines Enter the Information Age 239

##### 9.

The Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Movement  
1970–1990 271

Notes 311

Works Cited 349

Index 373

# INTRODUCTION

---

## *The Myth of Transience*

**W**riting in the *Academic Disciplines* is a history of writing instruction outside general-composition courses in American secondary and higher education, from the founding of the public secondary school system and research universities in the 1870s through the spread of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement in the 1980s. The vexed history of general-composition courses, especially freshman composition, has been told often and well by James A. Berlin, Wallace W. Douglas, Albert R. Kitzhaber, Robert J. Connors, and many others upon whom I often draw in this account. But my task here is to examine the ways writing has been taught—directly or indirectly—in the wider curriculum or, to be more precise, in the myriad curricula that make up the differentiated structure of secondary and higher education in modern America.

As surprising as it may seem to us today, there was no systematic writing instruction per se past the elementary school in America until the advent of mass education and the formation of discrete academic disciplines in the last third of the nineteenth century. Advanced instruction in vernacular language dates from antiquity, of course, and from the eighteenth century American colleges and preparatory academies taught rhetoric in the vernacular. But before the 1870s, writing was ancillary to speaking. Because the whole curriculum and much of the extracurriculum was based on public speaking (recitation, declamation, oratory, debate), there was little need for systematic writing instruction.



## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

For a speaker, writing was merely an aid to memory; for a reader, it was merely a substitute for a present speaker (private oral reading was still common well into the nineteenth century). The leadership roles which graduates of the old college commonly assumed—"the pulpit, the senate, and the bar"—also made writing ancillary to public speaking. Thus, formal writing instruction essentially amounted to training in handwriting, the mechanical process of transcribing sound to visual form. Literacy meant knowing one's ABCs. Once these orthographic conventions were mastered, "correct" writing was an ordinary outcome of being raised a gentleman or gentlewoman who spoke "correct" English, which is to say the language of the upper class. As Susan Miller has persuasively argued, writing was so embedded in the everyday orally based practices of that class that it was largely transparent and required little or no instruction beyond the elementary school.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1870s, however, the role of writing in education and in the wider culture had begun to shift in subtle but profound ways. America created a host of new professions whose members communicated primarily through texts that were never meant merely to be substitutes for oral communication: the myriad reports, memoranda, specifications, scholarly articles, and so on, which modern society developed. Professionals in and out of academia now used writing to manipulate texts as objects, to be silently studied, critiqued, compared, appreciated, and evaluated. With the revolution in print technology (the modern pen, Linotype, vastly improved presses, typewriter, duplicating machines, vertical files, etc.) and the parallel revolutions in industry (systematic management of far-flung enterprises) and in academia (disciplinary specialization), writing became central to organizing production and creating new knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Writing was now embedded in a whole array of complex and highly differentiated social practices carried on without face-to-face communication. The new professionals (academic or otherwise) increasingly wrote not for a general reader (that is, for any member of the educated class) but rather for specialized audiences of colleagues who were united not primarily by ties of class but by the shared activities, the goals, and—this is crucial—the unique written con-

ventions of a profession or discipline. With this enormous expansion of specialized knowledge and discourse, writing became, as Miller puts it, "a way of thinking, not just a way of preserving thinking for speech" (64).

Unfortunately, the new mass-education system America created to train this cadre of professionals failed to adjust its concept of writing to account for the fact that both writing and education had been transformed. In the new print-centered, compartmentalized secondary and higher-education system, writing was no longer a single, generalizable skill learned once and for all at an early age; rather it was a complex and continuously developing response to specialized text-based discourse communities, highly embedded in the differentiated practices of those communities. Nor was academia any longer a single discourse community but a collection of discrete communities, an aggregate of competing professional disciplines, each with its own specialized written discourse. Moreover, the system of secondary and higher education, once confined to the preparatory academy and the liberal arts college, now widened to include a whole spectrum of differentiated institutions (land-grant universities, technical institutes, public high schools, business schools, trade schools, etc.) preparing and credentialing students for a host of social roles. Each discipline, each kind of institution, developed its own "literacy," its own tacit expectations about how its members (and its students) should write.<sup>3</sup> Despite these profound changes, the mass-education system tenaciously clung to the outmoded conception of writing as transcribed speech and to the vanishing ideal of a single academic community, united by common values, goals, and standards of discourse. Operating together, these misconceptions had profound consequences for writing instruction.

One important result was a conceptual split between "content" and "expression," learning and writing. If writing was an elementary, mechanical skill, then it had no direct relation to the goals of instruction and could be relegated to the margins of a course, a curriculum, an institution. Knowledge and its expression could be conceived of as separate activities, with written expression of the "material" of the course a kind of adjunct to the "real" business of education, the teaching of factual knowledge. From

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

very early in the history of mass education, writing was primarily thought of as a way to examine students, not to teach them, as a means of demonstrating knowledge rather than of acquiring it. Though a few reformers struggled to overcome this false distinction, they never had widespread success, and academia never made writing a central part of teaching in the disciplines.

Another, more visible result of these misconceptions is a 120-year tradition of complaint about student writing (which Harvey Daniels has amusingly chronicled in *Famous Last Words*).<sup>4</sup> Because academics and other professionals assumed that writing was a generalizable, elementary skill and that academia held a universal, immutable standard of literacy, they were constantly disappointed when student writing failed to measure up to the local, and largely tacit, standards of a particular social class, institution, discipline, or profession by which they were in fact judging that writing. Educators produced report after report lamenting the “crisis” in student writing, secure in their assumption that writing was simply a form of talking rather than a complex and developing response to a community’s discourse—a mode of learning, in other words. In 1892 one of the first Harvard committees charged with the task of “solving” the “writing problem” thought it “a little less than absurd to suggest that any human being who can be taught to talk cannot likewise be taught to compose. Writing is merely the habit of talking with the pen instead of the tongue.”<sup>5</sup> Over the next century, committees of faculty and business leaders repeatedly expressed similar frustration that students had not “learned to write” by the time they reached high school or college or graduate school or career. But the complaints rarely addressed the central issue: standards of literacy were no longer stable; they were rising and, more importantly, multiplying. Thus, Miller concludes,

our natural tendency to inform contemporary education with this still-active aspect of an oral residue is also an implicit source for laments for what is curiously always thought of as the recently lost excellence of student discourse. But such nostalgia does not acknowledge . . . [that] literacy must, because of multiplied fields of writing, be relearned in new contexts throughout educational processes and later. We never get

"beyond" writing to oratory as the ancients did in their educational sequence, nor can we stabilize writing's conventions and merely reapply school writing in new settings [66].

The assumption that writing was "talking with the pen," an elementary transcription skill, mistakenly led educators to look for a single solution to a specific educational problem when they actually needed a whole new conception of the role of writing in learning, one that would take into account the modern organization of knowledge through written communication. They persisted in holding on to what Mike Rose has called the "myth of transience." "Despite the accretion of crisis reports, the belief persists in the American university that if we can just do *x*, or *y*, the problem [of poor student writing] will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work."<sup>6</sup> Because writing seemed to be independent of content learning, the many solutions proposed over the years tended to marginalize writing instruction and reinforce the myth of transience by masking the complexities of the task.

The first and most common "solution" was a general-composition course. When late-nineteenth-century educators cast about for ways to solve the "problem" of students' writing, they eventually settled on a single freshman course of about fifteen or thirty weeks (successor to a very different rhetoric course in the old liberal curriculum). Though it was taught in many ways to students of every kind, freshman composition almost always treated writing as a generalizable elementary skill, independent of disciplinary content. The course focused on mechanical skills: correct grammar, spelling, and usage necessary for transcribing preexisting, fully formed speech or thought into correct written form. The teaching of rhetoric, so central to the old oratorical tradition, gradually faded, though not without a fight, to be replaced by general composition. Writing instruction was denied disciplinary status, compartmentalized into freshman composition, and housed in English departments, where it competed (unsuccessfully) with the new professional discipline of literary study. In time, freshman English became ubiquitous, nearly always the

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

only institutionwide requirement for writing instruction (or writing) in higher education. And with systematic writing instruction thus marginalized, there arose an implicit assumption that general-composition courses should teach students from any background to write correct and coherent expository prose for any purpose in any social or disciplinary context—and that a student's failure to do so was evidence of the need for more elementary training or *remediation*, as it came to be called.

When general-composition courses did not succeed in this impossible task (despite countless experiments and reforms), institutions sometimes tried curriculumwide schemes. Though the phrase *writing across the curriculum* is relatively new, dating from the mid 1970s, the idea of sharing responsibility for writing instruction forms a recurrent theme throughout the history of American secondary and higher education. Like so many other educational reform movements, cross-curricular writing instruction was accepted in principle ("Every teacher should teach writing" is one of the oldest saws in American education), but in practice, reforms were absorbed and transmuted by the system they resisted. In this way reformers' ideas lost their power for change and instead merely reinforced the myth of transience, a process educational historians have long noted in other areas.<sup>7</sup>

There have been literally hundreds of cross-curricular writing programs since the turn of the century at institutions of every type. Indeed, each generation has produced its own versions of cross-curricular writing programs, yet none, except perhaps the last, has made a permanent impact on the modern university curriculum or on literacy in America. Sooner or later these programs were marginalized for many of the same reasons general-composition courses were. Because administrators and faculty did not perceive the central role of writing in modern academic disciplines and professional work, they tended to make writing instruction an adjunct to a course or program rather than an integral part of it. When they did require writing as part of regular courses in the disciplines, that writing was less likely to be integrated into the activity of the course or program and more likely to be seen merely as a favor to the English department or the institution, as a way of enforcing standards of correctness

or reinforcing general-composition courses, or as a means of evaluation.<sup>8</sup> The most mechanical aspects of writing received the most attention: "grammar across the curriculum," as C. W. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon have termed it.<sup>9</sup> Even disciplines that took responsibility for writing instruction tended to marginalize writing in special departmental writing courses (e.g., business writing, agricultural writing). Thus, the conceptual split between content and expression found its curricular embodiment not only in remedial or general-composition courses but also in discipline-specific writing courses taught by those outside the discipline (usually trained in English departments).

In the rush to find a single comprehensive solution, academia never systematically examined the nature of writing or its potential for improving learning. The myth of transience masked deep conflicts in the mass-education system over the nature of writing and learning: what is academic writing and how is it learned? What is an academic community and who should be admitted? America has never come to terms with the submerged conflicts that underlie its attitudes and approaches to advanced literacy. And this continuing failure to confront those conflicts kept writing instruction on the margins of the curriculum rather than at its center. As Rose concludes, "Wide-ranging change will occur only if the academy redefines writing for itself, changes the terms of the argument, [and] sees instruction in writing as one of its central concerns" (359).

These deep conflicts emerge as themes in my account of America's century-long flirtation with writing instruction in the disciplines. And in this chapter I outline four of these conflicts as a framework for the story which follows. The first two have to do with the nature of writing and its acquisition: writing as a single elementary skill, a transparent recording of speech or thought or physical reality, versus writing as a complex rhetorical activity, embedded in the differentiated practices of academic discourse communities; and writing acquisition as remediation of deficiencies in skill versus writing acquisition as a continuously developing intellectual and social attainment tied to disciplinary learning. The second two conflicts center on the relation between language and the structure of mass education: academia as a

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

single discourse community versus academia as many competing discourse communities; and disciplinary excellence versus social equity as the goal of writing instruction. By bringing these long-submerged conflicts into the light of historical analysis, it may be easier to see the enormity and complexity of the task that American mass education set for itself in teaching students "to write."

### *Academic Writing: Transparent Recording or Visible Rhetoric?*

Because late-nineteenth-century academics failed to shift from the old oral conception of writing as transcription to a new conception that took into account writing's vastly expanded functions, the role of writing in academia—both research and teaching—remained largely transparent, unexamined. Faculty thought of their writing not as persuasive discourse, subject to the same rhetorical and stylistic analysis as a sermon or campaign speech, but rather as an unproblematic rendering of the fruits of research, untainted (when done properly) by rhetorical and stylistic concerns. Historians of both rhetoric and science have pointed to important ideological factors that reinforced (some would say created) this blindness to the rhetorical nature of academic writing. The naive view of language as transparent recorder of thought or physical reality grew up with the scientific method in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It underlay the Scottish Common Sense rhetorical theory of Hugh Blair and George Campbell, which Americans imported in the early nineteenth century and applied fully in the new composition textbooks of the 1880s. James Berlin describes the view:

When the individual is freed from the biases of language, society, or history, the senses provide the mental faculties with a clear and distinct image of the world. The world readily surrenders its meaning to anyone who observes properly, and no operation of the mind—logical or otherwise—is needed to arrive at truth. To communicate, the speaker or writer—both now included—need only provide the language which corresponds either to the objects in the external world or to the ideas in his or her own mind—both are essentially the same—in such a way that

it reproduces the objects and the experience of them in the minds of the hearers.<sup>10</sup>

This naive view of language supported an ethic of scientific objectivity associated with an emerging positivism in academia, an ethic which reinforced the high status accorded science in modern industrial society. "Truth is to be discovered outside the rhetorical enterprise," Berlin continues, "through the method, usually the scientific method, of the appropriate discipline, or, as in poetry and oratory, through genius" (770). The ethic of scientific objectivity led academics to downplay the role of persuasion in their enterprise and to view their disciplines as vehicles for discovering the bare facts and immutable laws of nature. Scientists and scholars maintained that the old oral, persuasive rhetoric in the classical tradition (increasingly identified with emotional or grandiloquent oratory) should have nothing to do with intellectual inquiry, that good academic writing must therefore be an objective rendering of reality.

Operating together with these ideological barriers were powerful institutional barriers to seeing the differentiated and rhetorical nature of academic writing. The naive view of language supported the wider organizational structure of the new university by confining discourse to discipline-specific forums. Faculty engaged in written discourse primarily within a discipline, not among disciplines, and expected their students to do the same. In both the new departmentalized university and the new professionalized society, there were powerful reasons why scientists and scholars should *not* step outside their respective symbolic universes. It was the ever-increasing specialization of knowledge (and, with it, of discourse) that allowed modern academia to create new knowledge so effectively and rapidly. Persuading many people from many communities to understand and value one's productions is immensely difficult and time-consuming, often impossible. As various disciplines became accepted into academia, their role within the institution and the wider society allowed that responsibility to shift from individual scholars to the discipline, through its professional associations, or to the institution itself, through its public-relations channels. Though efforts to disseminate and



## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

popularize discipline-specific knowledge and to promote disciplines' public images continued, these were largely separate from the increasingly more specialized scholarly dialogues going on within disciplines. And of course dissemination is lower in status than specialized research; it is often left to specialists of a different sort—those in journalism and public relations. On a broader level, widespread dissemination of expert knowledge sometimes constituted a threat to professional communities, whose social role involved commodifying that knowledge in specialized written language to maintain professional jurisdiction over certain social functions (the legal profession is the most obvious example).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the transparency of rhetoric in academic disciplines is in many ways a function of specialization. As the disciplines became separated from one another and from the wider culture, persuasion became so limited, so bound up with the genres (and activities) of a specific community's discourse, that it could be taken for granted by members of the community. Scholars saw little need to enter other symbolic worlds, little benefit in making their own discourse accessible to outsiders, little reason to translate their knowledge into the genres of other communities and thus reconcile their activities and conventions of discourse with those of other disciplines.

Yet the naive, mechanical conception of writing which specialization fostered contradicted the actual practice of academics, for whom writing was a very human thing, a complex social activity involving a whole range of rhetorical choices, intellectual, professional, and political, as recent research into the social basis of writing has shown.<sup>12</sup> As a social activity, writing is inevitably embedded in and conditioned by a community. By its very nature it is local, context specific, dependent on a community for its existence and its meaning. *Literacy* is thus a function of the specific community in which certain kinds of reading and writing activities take place. Standards of acceptable discourse vary among social and disciplinary groups, a fact that we implicitly recognize in our daily affairs. As Brazilian sociolinguist Terezinha Carraher notes, a professor may, without irony, express pleasure

that her maid is "literate" because she can barely decode recipes and take down phone messages, but complain that her students are "illiterate" because they do not yet understand the conventions of written discourse in her discipline.<sup>13</sup>

This social perspective on writing embeds each text in a context of human behaviors. Genre becomes, in Carolyn Miller's formulation, "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations."<sup>14</sup> Those recurrent situations, the habits of a community, give rise to repeated formal elements in texts: conventions of argument, evidence, diction, style, organization, and documentation which allow those familiar with the conventions to recognize and understand the writing of a particular community. Cooperative human activities (to borrow Lev Vygotski's phrase) organize themselves through language. In the activities of modern mass education and disciplinary inquiry, the language that counts most is written—but written in ways characteristic of the various cooperative activities, the various communities and subcommunities that make up the system. As Arthur N. Applebee says of the symbolic universes of the disciplines (*paradigms* as he calls them, following Thomas Kuhn), "These paradigms provide tacit guidelines about proper lines of evidence and modes of argument. Though rarely made explicit, their influence is pervasive; they determine what will be seen as interesting, what as obvious, and what as needing elaboration."<sup>15</sup>

One can understand the writing of a community, as Charles Bazerman has pointed out, only in terms of the community's activities: the issues it addresses, the purposes it serves, the concrete objects it manipulates, the questions it has excluded or already answered to the satisfaction of the community, the things that can be left unsaid because of the community's history and activity, or the things that might be said to accomplish its objectives. To read and write meaningfully, one must, in other words, understand how the community interprets its texts, those shared understandings (Bazerman's term) which connect text to context. Using the conventions of a genre without understanding (tacitly or explicitly) how those conventions operate within the community is as meaningless as learning how pieces move in a chess

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

game without knowing the conditions under which one piece may capture another or knowing that the object is to checkmate the opposing king.<sup>16</sup>

Over the past two decades, scholars have just begun to study the rhetoric of academic disciplines and other professional communities on a case-by-case basis, to analyze the interactional rules, tacit and explicit, which govern the knowledge-making and communicating activities of various discourse communities and subcommunities. These scholars do not attempt, as did earlier critics of academic specialization, to banish specialized vocabularies, arcane “rhetoric,” in order to restore some universal clarity to the academic Babel. Rather than seek to overcome modern complexity, they study the ways modern complexity is reflected in and created by writing. Their goal is to advance the activities of specialized communities, not to transcend specialization. Studies by Donald McCloskey (economics), Greg Myers (biology), Charles Bazerman (the experimental article in various disciplines), Glenn Broadhead and Richard C. Freed (business consulting), Hayden White (history), James Boyd White (law), JoAnne Yates (industrial management), along with many studies of knowledge making in science, explore the institutional as well as the intellectual and material settings in which writing takes place.<sup>17</sup>

Such analysis is a complex undertaking within any one community or subcommunity, for each is made up of members who play many and often-shifting roles; the rules of the game constantly change in response to a wide range of intellectual, material, and political forces within and outside the community. Moreover, these studies have often met with considerable resistance from mainline scholars. But only such sociorhetorical analysis, discipline by discipline, will provide a foundation on which to construct meaningful generalizations about how writing works—and how students learn to make it work.

### *Writing Instruction: Remediation or Development?*

The transparency of writing (and rhetoric) within the academic disciplines had profound effects on writing instruction. As I

noted, modern mass education carried over a premodern view of writing as a single, generalizable skill, learned once and forever. Students whose writing did not conform to a particular community's standards were thought to exhibit some deficit, which had to be remedied *before* they could be admitted to the community. Thus, systematic writing instruction beyond elementary school was often classed as remedial and relegated to the margins of the system. The systematic teaching of rhetoric as public discourse—the heart of the classical liberal arts curriculum for centuries—almost passed out of the curriculum entirely, as academia increasingly valued the pursuit of specialized knowledge on matters of disciplinary import over the teaching of persuasive discourse on matters of broad civic import.<sup>18</sup>

But if one sees writing (and rhetoric) as deeply embedded in the differentiated practices of disciplines, not as a single elementary skill, one must reconceive in profound ways the process of learning to write. Fred Newton Scott, Gertrude Buck, Sterling Andrus Leonard, and other Deweyan reformers in the early years of this century created an alternative approach to writing instruction, one that saw language acquisition as a socially conditioned, developmental process; but only in the last three decades has a social perspective received widespread attention.<sup>19</sup> Viewed from a developmental rather than a remedial perspective, learning to write becomes, as recent research has demonstrated, a process of socialization or acculturation, analogous to a young child learning to speak. Theories of first-language acquisition (such as Vygotski's) illuminate the process of acquiring advanced literacy in an academic or professional community. The neophyte gradually acquires the community's shared knowledge not only by listening and reading but also by experimenting with verbal formulations, orally, as with children, and later in writing, through situations embedded in the life of the neophyte's community, whether the family or the discipline. Like adults talking to babbling children, the more skilled members of the disciplinary community, instructors, supervisors, or more experienced peers, recast the neophyte's utterances in a form suitable to the community until, as Bazerman says, "the beginner produces an utterance recognized as bearing meaning within the socially shared system" (304).

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

During this process of linguistic initiation, the community often applies more tolerant standards to the verbal performances of neophytes than to the performances of those it recognizes as fully socialized members. It is crucial to note that this gradual and often-subtle process of observation, modeling, and intervention requires the neophyte to use the language of the community *while* participating in its activity not *before* participating, as the remedial view would have it. Through participation students learn to connect verbal formulations to the meanings with which the community invests them. Through participation students learn not only the community's terms and categories but also when and how to apply them: the interactional rules (304).

In the process of acquiring discipline-specific literacy, the adept's intervention during a student's apprenticeship often comes about through written forms which recognize the neophyte's status: textbook experiments to be performed and written up, standard questions to answer, or model cases to argue. These activities produce a scaffolding, "a framework of meaning into which the neophytes' impulses, behaviors and language can shape themselves."<sup>20</sup> This scaffolding is gradually incorporated into her own behavior, until the instructions of the adept become internalized as self-instructions and she develops what Vygotski calls "an internal language."<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the neophyte so thoroughly internalizes the discourse of the community and, with it, the community's perceptions, assumptions, and behaviors, that she begins to think and act—and write—like a member of the community. By the time she is accepted as an adept, she has at least tacitly understood and accepted the community's values and goals, its rules and sanctions; she has developed an allegiance to the community, an identity and role within it.

This theory of writing acquisition helps explain why writing in the academic disciplines has been so little studied or systematically taught. Because apprentices in a discipline very gradually learn its written conventions as an active and integral part of their socialization in a community, the process of learning to write seems transparent. Scholars and researchers come to view the particular genres that the disciplinary community has evolved (and each member of it has internalized) not as rhetorical strate-

gies, conventional—but gradually changing—means of persuasion; instead, the community's genres and conventions appear to be unproblematic renderings of the fruits of research. Persuasion, as Bazerman argues, "is at the heart of science [and, I might add, of all academic disciplines], not at the unrespectable fringe" (321). But the symbolic universe that a scholar grows to inhabit denies rhetoric while nevertheless depending on it. A researcher is likely to see his writing practices not as rhetorical choices but as business as usual or "simply good science" (321).

The kinds of evidence accepted, the style deemed appropriate, the familiar turns of phrase—these are learned as part of the *common sense* of the discipline, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz uses the term: "not what the mind cleared of cant spontaneously apprehends [but] what the mind filled with presuppositions . . . concludes."<sup>22</sup> Disciplines never acquired a conscious knowledge of the rhetorical conventions they used daily and expected their students to use, for these conventions were so bound up with the activity of the discipline and were acquired so subtly in the learning of the discipline itself that they were rarely thought of as writing instruction. To students bound for a career, as well as to the faculty who prepared them for one, writing was something acquired as a matter of course, part of the apprenticeship in the discipline which formal schooling provided (and the apprentice system was, after all, the method of the German university which the American university adopted in certain respects during its formative years).

The transparency of rhetoric in the academic disciplines also helps explain why writing instruction has so often been marginalized. At the curricular level, if professionals are not aware of the role rhetoric plays in their own discipline, then they will see little need to teach it. From the time the modern academic disciplines emerged as discrete communities in the mid and late nineteenth century, they have rarely integrated systematic writing instruction into their curricula to initiate the neophytes consciously into the written conventions of a particular field. Instead, they have required separate courses, usually general composition. At the most advanced levels of instruction, usually in graduate school, some departments have offered courses in research meth-

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

ods which treat discipline-specific writing conventions. But these have affected only a tiny fraction of students in secondary and higher education; the great majority of students have had no conscious, systematic, discipline-specific writing instruction.

The transparency of rhetoric in the disciplines makes it much more difficult for faculty to see and intervene in the students' socialization into the discipline, though that transparency at the same time encourages complaints. Because the development of discipline-specific writing skill is gradual and subtle, bound up with the activity of the discipline, faculty have tended to mistake the inevitable struggles of students to acquire the rhetorical conventions of a discipline for poor writing or sheer ignorance. As Applebee points out, "When we move beyond remedial or 'basic' English, problems in managing this [discipline-specific rhetorical] aspect of text are the cause of much that we call poor writing."<sup>23</sup> But the students' struggles to comprehend the new symbolic universe and operate within it are often misinterpreted by the instructor, who has been so gradually and thoroughly socialized into the symbolic universe of the discipline that he often cannot see or understand why others, who are writing about the same "content," do not "make sense." Though the students may understand the "facts," they may not understand the essential rhetorical structures: specialized lines of argument, vocabulary, and organizational conventions, the tacit understandings about what must be stated and what assumed—in short, the culture of the discipline that gives meaning to the "facts." Only through a long process of acculturation—participating in the activities of the discipline—will they acquire those shared understandings that allow their writing to "make sense."<sup>24</sup> Because the rhetoric of the discipline appears not to be taught, efforts to teach it may require those in a discipline first to become conscious of rhetoric's role in their activities and, second, to make a conscious effort to teach it. But given the transparency of rhetoric for faculty, the usual tendency has been to complain about poor student writing and locate the problem elsewhere, thus reinforcing the myth of transience.

Yet students have nevertheless learned to write in many ways and places. Despite periodic alarms about the pernicious effects

of Americans' poor writing, the nation's secondary- and higher-education systems, its vast industrial plant, cultural activities, and governmental structures have never been crippled by poor writing; indeed, for the last half century America has been the cultural, educational, and scientific center of the world, as well as the dominant world power. Somehow, enough Americans learned to write in the ways they needed to in order to carry on, and rather well at that. The experience of other industrialized nations (few of whom have composition courses in higher education) would suggest that students can and do learn to write as a regular part of their education or of their work in a discipline or a profession.<sup>25</sup> Despite the misconceptions about the nature of writing, despite the marginalization of systematic instruction, America has evolved several tacit traditions of student writing: the notebook, the research paper, the laboratory report, the case study, the essay examination, and so on, through which faculty have taught students the writing of the discipline, though perhaps less consciously or less rapidly or less effectively than with direct instruction.

However, these venues for writing instruction are difficult to locate and study. In modern America, the most complex print (and electronic) culture in history, writing is enormously varied, embedded in countless social activities, and performs myriad functions. Even within the educational sector, students write (and acquire competence in writing) as a part of daily work at all levels, from the most rudimentary activities (a student filling in a blank on a preprinted worksheet) to the most sophisticated knowledge making (writing a scholarly article, for example).

Despite the complexity and transparency of these tacit, unsystematic venues for writing acquisition, they nevertheless form an important part of the story of writing in the academic disciplines. Unfortunately, these tacit traditions of student writing have rarely been studied, much less from a historical perspective. In this study I view the various kinds of student writing as genres, typified responses to the activity of a particular institution, discipline, or profession, which have changed along with the educational and professional environments of which they are a part. The Chemistry 101 lab report is a reflection, however dim, of scientific articles



## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

in academic journals or of reports written in corporate research and development labs. The sociology class' case study echoes the social worker's case history, the sophomore's Shakespeare paper the literary critic's journal article. To tease these traditions out of the pedagogical and institutional fabric into which they are woven, I looked to a variety of sources: textbooks, curricula, syllabi, examinations, student papers, surveys of teaching practices. But these sources are inevitably piecemeal and often ambiguous. I have slighted many curricula, subdisciplines, and indeed whole disciplines in this account. I can only hope that those who are interested in the role of writing in disciplinary communities will fill in this very crude sketch, a project that has already begun as the current writing-across-the-curriculum movement (WAC) explores the differences in the rhetoric and teaching of academic disciplines, as I discuss in chapter 9. This exploration of discipline-specific conventions is already yielding much information on the ways disciplines constitute themselves through written discourse. Such study is essential if we are to understand how disciplines perpetuate themselves by initiating new members into the discourse of their communities.

### *Academic Discourse: Community or Communities?*

The complex origins of mass education in America made it difficult for academia to view learning to write as an initiation into a discourse community, a process of gradually coming to use language in a certain way to become accepted, "literate," or, as is often the case in modern American higher education, credentialed in some profession. Before the advent of the modern university in the 1870s, academia was indeed a single discourse community. Institutions of higher learning built an intellectual and social community by selecting students primarily on the basis of social class (less than 1 percent of the population was admitted), which guaranteed linguistic homogeneity, and by initiating them intellectually through a series of highly language dependent methods—the traditional recitation, disputation, debate, and oral examination of the old liberal curriculum. Equally important, most students shared common values (Christian, often sectarian) with

their teachers (primarily ministers). They pursued a uniform course of study and were then duly welcomed as full members of the nation's governing elite.<sup>26</sup>

The modern university changed all that. It provided the specialized knowledge that drove the new urban-industrial economy and a new class of specialized *professionals* (the term came into use during the period) who managed that economy, with its secular rationale and complex bureaucratic organization—what Burton J. Bledstein has aptly called “the culture of professionalism.” Beginning with the land-grant colleges of the late nineteenth century and continuing with the rise of the modern university on the German model, the academic discourse community became fragmented. Numbers swelled, with enrollments tripling as a percentage of the population between 1900 and 1925 alone. Students from previously excluded social groups were admitted, destroying linguistic homogeneity. The new elective curriculum was introduced to prepare students for a host of emerging professional careers in the new industrial society. The elective curriculum compartmentalized knowledge and broke one relatively stable academic discourse community into many fluctuating ones. And the active, personal, language-dependent instructional methods of the old curriculum were replaced by passive, rather impersonal methods borrowed from Germany or, later, from scientific management: lecture, objective testing, and the like. Ultimately, the professional faculty who replaced the gentlemen scholars and divines of the old curriculum came to see secondary and undergraduate education as only one of several competing responsibilities (along with graduate teaching, research, and professional service). And the teaching of writing—initiating the neophytes into a discourse community—suffered accordingly.

Because it is tempting to recall academia's very different past and hope for a very different future, the term *academic community* has powerful spiritual and political connotations, but today academia is a *discourse* community only in a context so broad as to have little meaning in terms of shared linguistic forms, either for the advancement of knowledge (which now goes on in disciplinary communities and subcommunities) or for the initiation of new members (who are initiated into a specific community's

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

discourse). Thus, to speak of the academic community as if its members shared a single set of linguistic conventions and traditions of inquiry is to make a categorical mistake. In the aggregate of all the tightly knit, turf-conscious disciplines and departments, each of its own discourse community, the modern university consists. Many have wished it otherwise.

Despite these profound changes, American educators have continued to think of the academic community as holding out a single compositional norm, which would speak intelligently about the multiform new knowledge to a "general reader." In their complaints about student writing, academics hark back nostalgically to a golden age of academic community where Johnny could both read and write the "plain English" that purists enshrine. But that golden age never existed in the modern university (and writing *per se* was not valued or even evaluated in the old college). As Daniel P. and Lauren B. Resnick have observed, "There is little to go back to in terms of pedagogical method, curriculum, or school organization. The old tried and true approaches, which nostalgia today prompts us to believe might solve current problems, were designed neither to achieve the literacy standards sought today nor to assure successful literacy for everyone . . . there is no simple past to which we can return."<sup>27</sup> Though academia held onto a generalized ideal of an academic community sharing a single advanced literacy, there was never any consensus in the modern university about the nature of that community or its language. Academic discourse, like academia itself, continued its drive toward increasing specialization. The university became an aggregate of competing discourse communities; it was not a single community. But the myth of a single academic discourse community—and a golden age of student writing—endured.

American academia today (and for the last hundred years or so) is a community primarily in a broad institutional sense, a collection of people going about a vast enterprise, in much the same way that we speak of the "business community" as a sector of national life. The academic disciplines are in one sense united through their common missions: teaching, research, and service. But disciplines have been so diverse, so independent, and so bound up with professional communities outside academia that

they require no common language or even shared values and methods within the university in order to pursue those missions. Those genres and conventions of writing that are shared by all academic disciplines are also shared by professional communities outside academia. And within academia, the conventions (and beyond them the assumptions and methodologies) of the various disciplines are characterized more by their differences than by their similarities. The various disciplines have grown to constitute the modern university through accretion, as Gerald Graff has forcefully argued, and through their relevance to concerns in the wider society, not through their logical relation to each other—so much so that “interdisciplinary” study is always a notable (and often suspect) exception.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, an academic is likely to have more linguistic common ground with a fellow professional in the corporate sector than with another academic in an unrelated field, except in regard to purely institutional matters (governance, academic freedom, teaching loads, etc.). As a leading sociologist of higher education, Burton Clark, puts it, academia is made up of “small worlds, different worlds.”<sup>29</sup>

The problematic nature of the modern academic discourse community in large part explains the survival of the myth of transience and the American university’s century-long flirtation with cross-curricular writing programs. Since the turn of the century, the whole structure of higher education has depended on what Laurence R. Veysey calls the “patterned isolation of its component parts.” This isolation “required that people continually talk past each other, failing to listen to what others were really saying.”<sup>30</sup> Because the modern university served so many conflicting interests—students, teachers, parents, administrators, industry, and government, as well as a host of competing disciplines with their own agendas—it required “barriers to frank dialogue which are stylized into courtesy,” or in rhetorical terms, discipline-specific conventions operating independently under an umbrella of god-terms whose meanings were not shared or even examined too deeply: research and service most prominently, but also general education, humanism, and science. “Tacitly obeying the need to fail to communicate,” Veysey goes on, “each academic group normally refrained from too rude or brutal an unmasking

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

of the rest. And in this manner, without major economic incentives and without a genuine sharing of ideals, [academics] labored together in what became a diverse but fundamentally stable institution" (337). Conscious, systematic, curriculumwide writing instruction was an unfortunate victim of the need for stability.

The modern university's compartmentalized, additive organization of knowledge was made possible—or at least made more efficient—by the transparency of rhetoric and the marginalization of writing instruction. The lack of student writing freed the faculty from much paper grading and interaction with students, leaving more time to pursue those two new ideals which redefined the university in the late nineteenth century: discipline-specific research and utilitarian service. But in a deeper sense, the lack of student writing allowed faculty to ignore other disciplines. Conscientious writing instruction forces a teacher to explain (and to some extent conceptualize) the rhetorical conventions of her discipline and—more difficult still—occasionally to describe how the conventions she requires for, say, a history paper, are different from the conventions a student is wrestling with for a chemistry or literature paper in another class. Ignoring writing instruction in the disciplines made it much easier for higher education to proceed in neat compartments, without confronting messy questions about the relationships between disciplines or, messier still, questions about the ways students should be capable of using language when they enter the broader society. Because faculty rarely asked their students to struggle with the complexities of entering a specific discourse community through writing, they could more easily maintain the illusion that the university was still one discourse community, that such terms as *reason*, *the generally educated person*, or *the humanities* referred to single, unitary concepts, independent of the new organization of knowledge and the new mass society that created it. Thus, it was in the interest of the university to view writing as a *Ding an sich*, a separate and independent technique, something that should have been learned elsewhere, taught by someone else—in high school or in a freshman "service" course. Chapters 2 through 4 trace these effects of increasing specialization on writing instruction. Chapter 2 examines the transition from the old liberal curriculum

to the new differentiated curriculum of secondary and higher education. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the ways the two new ideals of academic life, research and utilitarian service, shaped writing instruction into its modern forms.

Almost from the beginning of the modern university, however, there were critics who attacked academic specialization and the narrow compartmentalization of writing instruction. But instead of accepting or confronting specialization, with its thorny rhetorical and political problems, they ignored or sought to transcend it. Reformers from both the left and the right attempted to reestablish an academic community where students and faculty shared a common language and, in many cases, a set of values.<sup>31</sup> "General education" was the single rallying cry of reformers from irreconcilably opposed camps. Predictably, the reformers did not succeed in building a unified academic discourse community, but they did reinforce the myth of transience by nurturing the assumption that the linguistic millennium would soon come, if only academia would adopt some particular form of general education.

Chapters 5 through 7 treat the history of general-education reforms as they affected writing instruction. I have roughly divided the reform efforts into three strands, although they do often intersect in complex ways. First, the "social efficiency" movement of the "administrative progressives" (Lawrence Cremin's terms) applied the industrial model to education in an attempt to forge a unified society through bureaucratic organization (chapter 5). Its solution to the writing problem was remedial writing courses and programs. Second, the genteel tradition (or "liberal culture," as Veysey calls it) defended the humanities against the onslaught of scientific specialization, commercial philistinism, and the diluting of "standards of taste," which they blamed on immigration and industrialization (chapter 6). It resisted systematic writing instruction and trusted that the reading and discussion of the "great books" would improve students' writing. Third, the Deweyan progressives sought to unify the sciences and arts, manual and liberal education, in a new rational democratic state (chapter 7). The Deweyan progressives promoted cross-curricular writing instruction as part of a broader "correlation" movement, which

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

attempted to unify subjects around social concerns. None of the three established a tradition of successfully integrating writing instruction into the curriculum. Through each wave of reform, the myth of transience persisted; and in the post-World War II era, these efforts to restore linguistic consensus continued to animate reforms in writing and general education, despite the almost complete triumph of specialization in academia. Even today some manifestations of the latest interdisciplinary effort, the WAC movement, still seek to reunite academia into a coherent discourse community and solve, once and for all, the problem of poor student writing and, in the same stroke, the troubling incoherence of modern education. In part three (chapters 8 and 9) I take up these postwar developments.

### *The Goals of Writing Instruction: Equity or Excellence?*

Efforts to initiate students into the discourses of specialized disciplines have continually been marginalized by another fundamental conflict within academia. As Burton Clark has pointed out, modern mass-education systems throughout the world must accommodate the competing claims of "equity" and "excellence," as he terms them or, more broadly, of inclusion and exclusion. Pressure from excluded groups to widen access almost inevitably conflicts with pressure from various sources to maintain or raise standards. Every industrialized nation has these conflicts. In the Soviet Union, for example, the conflict has traditionally been between admitting students to specialized professional training on the basis of competitive examinations or on the basis of their class origins, with workers' children receiving preference. In every nation, excluded groups have at times succeeded, through political pressure, in temporarily forcing educational systems to promote equity. However, such victories are, as Clark points out, likely to be hard won and impermanent, for the differentiated, agonistic structure of disciplines, which organizes postelementary education in the modern world, tends to value exclusionary standards of excellence over equity.<sup>32</sup> Writing instruction is part of that conflict. To teach students the discourse of a professional

elite is often a crucial part of initiating them into the profession; to exclude them from such discourse is to make that initiation more difficult, if not impossible. By relegating systematic writing instruction to the margins of academic work, outside the specific disciplinary contexts where students are taught to enter coveted professional roles, institutions preserve standards of excellence and reduce social equity.

However, American mass education has managed to accommodate both values by institutionalizing ambiguity in many ways through its approach to writing and its teaching. General-composition courses have in one sense been a means of widening access by helping to “prepare” students for college work. But to the extent that those courses were treated as remedial or purgatorial, they also performed a “gatekeeping” function by keeping students on the margins of the institution. For much of this century, many institutions have used freshman composition as a way of weeding out those considered unfit for college work *before* they had the opportunity to enter specialized studies.<sup>33</sup> Through this gatekeeping function, general-composition courses have offered the mass-education system a means of dealing with the successive waves of previously excluded students who have continually flocked into the higher-education system since the late nineteenth century.

As Rose has argued, the myth of transience allows this ambiguity to go unexamined. It blinds academics to the effects of widening access and the shifting nature of literacy in the mass-education system. Thus it reinforces the status quo.

Like any golden age or utopian myth, the myth of transience assures its believers that the past was better or that the future will be. The turmoil they are currently in will pass. The source of the problem is elsewhere; thus it can be ignored or temporarily dealt with until the tutors or academics or grammar schools or high schools or families make the changes they must make. The myth, then, serves to keep certain fundamental recognitions and thus certain changes at bay [336].

Rose is referring to general-composition courses here and their marginalization as remedial or preparatory adjuncts to the “real”



## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

work of the academy. But another of those institutional ambiguities which the myth of transience reinforces is the split between conscious, systematic attempts to improve writing in general-composition courses and the transparent, unconscious writing acquisition in the specialized disciplines. By relegating conscious, systematic writing instruction (and evaluation) to general-composition courses, faculty in the disciplines have rarely had to address the relationship between writing and excellence, between language and equity, in terms of their own disciplines and professions. Faculty are rarely held formally responsible by institutions for initiating students into the discourse of their disciplines (and therefore of the professional roles tied to them). And, thus, disciplines have found it easy to ignore the role that writing plays in students' preparation for and admission to the professions.

In the absence of conscious, discipline-specific writing instruction, students whose language backgrounds allowed them to learn the discourse of a discipline without such instruction were more likely to enter successfully the professions associated with it; those students whose backgrounds made conscious, discipline-specific language instruction necessary were much less likely to succeed. And because the function of language in this sorting was thought to be generalized, transparent—a matter of prior instruction, aptitude, intelligence, or dedication rather than of conscious, discipline-specific teaching—faculty rarely felt responsible for addressing the issue of language and access to professional roles. Though there were occasional skirmishes over responsibility for poor student writing, these were a small price to pay compared to the full-scale political battles that occurred in nations where students were consciously and overtly selected and tracked on the basis of their written performances on externally graded papers and essay examinations.

At such times when America perceived a shortage of professionals in some field, academics in that field widened access and paid more attention to teaching—initiating—students, including their writing. The times of greatest interest in laboratory writing, for example, came when scientists were in greater demand after World War I and after Sputnik (see chapters 3 and 8); and the current writing-across-the-curriculum movement in large part

began as a response to pressure from minorities for greater access to higher education and thus professional roles (see chapter 9).

But in the absence of external pressures for widening access, disciplines typically exert pressure for higher standards and greater exclusion. They are agonistically structured enterprises, both within and among themselves. Disciplines compete among themselves for institutional and social status, with the attendant rewards. Maintaining high standards—"excellence," to use Clark's term—helps to raise the status of a discipline. Thus, it is sometimes in the interest of a discipline to restrict access. High standards are also in the interest of an individual institution to the extent that prestige comes from perceived excellence in research. And valuing disciplinary excellence serves the interests of society at large to the extent that it encourages professions to produce (or conserve) knowledge and provide services considered important to society as a whole. Moreover, scholars within each community compete with each other for professional accomplishment and status. In doing so, they advance the work of the community enterprise. A discipline is structured as a series of hurdles, many of them primarily written—examinations, theses, refereed publications, applications, tenure and promotion cases, and so on—designed to promote and reward the production (or conservation) of knowledge.

The transparency of writing masks that the rules of the game are, in many ways, rhetorical; written discourse plays an important (at some points crucial) role in professional advancement. And the whole system depends upon disciplinary boundaries that are, in varying degrees, established and maintained rhetorically through the unique discursive activity of each community. Thus, conscious, systematic, discipline-specific writing instruction involves trade-offs. Time and resources spent teaching writing may reduce time and resources available for intramural activities, such as conducting research or providing professional services—the century-old conflict between teaching and research. And in a deeper sense, consciously translating the discipline's rhetorical universe into language that students at lower levels could understand may be seen as trivializing or watering down the very knowledge the discipline is charged with upholding. Initiating

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

greater numbers into its ranks may thus pose a threat to the status of a discipline. Attempts at creating well-articulated secondary and undergraduate curricula incorporating writing have been largely unsuccessful in part because they were perceived as lowering standards. A discipline might improve its work by becoming conscious of its sociorhetorical structures, if only because it could more effectively train neophytes—or train more of them. But, unless spurred by external pressures, disciplines have not found it necessary to examine, much less improve, the way students are initiated into their respective symbolic universes. Given the lack of incentives operating within the differentiated and agonistic structure of the disciplines, writing instruction in the disciplines has tended to remain an informal and largely unconscious dimension of the regular activity of each community, a transparent part of business as usual.

By confining formal writing instruction to general-composition courses, academia was able to serve the values of equity without threatening the disciplines' pursuit of excellence. Disciplines were free to set rhetorically based standards tacitly. At the same time they could deny (or leave unexamined) the rhetorical nature of their work and thus the responsibility to articulate or systematically teach their discourse. In this way, the peculiar role that writing instruction played in American mass education reinforced the differentiated curricular and institutional structure. The myth of transience is adaptive, for it helps to mediate within the institution the deep value conflicts between equity and excellence, but it does so at the expense of a genuine examination of the ways that writing influences higher learning—and access to the professions which depend on that learning.

### *Beyond the Myth of Transience: Some Notes on Scope and Methods*

Because my subject is so broad, reaching into every discipline and almost every educational setting, I have omitted much and condensed more to produce a one-volume study of efforts to teach writing across the curriculum. Nevertheless, I attempt, through occasional case studies, to demonstrate how some specific disci-

plines and institutions have approached the problem of training their students to write. But this history does not do justice to the diversity of writing instruction within subdisciplines and fields or to the enviable variety of educational institutions America has built. I pass over a whole tradition in departments of journalism, for example, and do little more than mention the long traditions of advanced courses in composition and rhetoric within English and speech departments. As current research into the role of writing and writing pedagogies in individual disciplines continues, the story of writing instruction in various disciplines will be told in greater depth and detail than is possible in this overview. And that research, both synchronic and diachronic, will allow historians to offer richer perspectives and make more informed generalizations than those I tentatively posit here.

In the same way, the institutional perspective I bring to this study is also limited, but it offers an alternative to the common approaches to the history of writing instruction. Historians of rhetoric in academia have almost always taken as their subject freshman composition. They have examined it through the lens of the English department or through the lens of cultural and rhetorical history. My method is at once broader and narrower. I look at writing from the perspective of academic institutions, especially their disciplinary structure, rather than from the perspective of a single department or of broad cultural and rhetorical categories.

One focus of historians has been on the evolution of general-composition courses, particularly the ways that evolution has shaped current pedagogical practices in English departments. This focus is logical: the most visible efforts to teach writing and to reform its teaching have centered in English departments. Yet the writing that students do in general-composition courses forms only a small part (though perhaps a more important part) of the writing that they do in their schooling. And the pedagogical practices in general-composition courses may differ from or even conflict with the writing practices in other courses.<sup>34</sup> To understand the ways that students learn to write, one must go beyond the small and all-too-often marginalized component of the curriculum which treats writing explicitly and look at the broader,

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

though largely tacit traditions that students encounter in the whole curriculum. Thus, I discuss general-composition courses only in the context of writing in other disciplines, and the English department only in its wider institutional context (e.g., writing in "great books" general-education programs).

In the end, a narrow focus on the history of composition courses may actually reinforce the myth of transience, since it may credit freshman English with a larger or more cohesive effect than it has ever had. In the process, we may lose the institutional perspective that would see composition courses as one of many ways students learn (or fail to learn) written discourse of many kinds, and the English department as only one site of conflict in the long struggle to reform writing instruction. Simply reforming freshman English (again) will not adequately address the deeper issues of writing acquisition: the nature of academic writing, its relation to disciplinary formation and perpetuation, and its relation to students' access to professional communities.

A second focus of historians has been the relationship between composition courses and broader cultural and intellectual forces—for example, Richard Ohmann's radical critique of freshman composition and the values of the military-industrial complex, or Berlin's study of freshman composition and the development of rhetorical theory in America.<sup>35</sup> My approach owes much to this cultural analysis. These and other radical critiques of composition courses in academia have pointedly revealed the shallowness of historical analysis that ignores the social and political contexts of education. Writing instruction is indeed "always related to the plurality of competing ideologies," as Berlin argues in *Rhetoric and Reality* (5). But those ideological conflicts are rarely debated explicitly in academic institutions, for they are mediated by the compartmentalized structure of knowledge and of labor, by the separation of departments, disciplines, and sub-disciplines. The ideological and political conflicts within the English department, or any other, are carried on within immediate institutional contexts, as well as within broader cultural ones. By looking at writing in the context of the organizational structures and attitudes of academia, I tell the story of writing instruction from an institutional perspective, in hopes that such a perspective

can illuminate the reasons why specific traditions have grown up and specific reforms have succeeded or failed within academic institutions.

As I trust this history demonstrates, it has been too easy for Americans of all ideological camps to forget that specialization, like the perceived illiteracy which was one of its manifestations, is not a temporary aberration, to be corrected with some new program or philosophy; it is the fundamental organizing principle of modern education and, behind that, of modern knowledge itself. Divisions are not only inevitable but also, if we understand them correctly, invaluable as a means of constructing curricula and writing pedagogies that are responsive to the nuances and complexities of modern knowledge and social organization. And where divisions dictate exclusions (as they must), a conscious understanding of the way language operates to differentiate knowledge and labor may help us to create a more equitable means of apportioning educational resources and social roles, as well as more effective means of teaching students the specialized discourses that are bound up with those roles in our postmodern Babel.

The many critics of education who today, as in decades past, complain that academia is hopelessly fragmented are in one sense correct. Barring some dramatic shift to a single cultural ideal (a frighteningly coercive prospect) we must live with these divisions and exclusions, communities and elites. Language (and knowledge) in a pluralistic society, like language in any but the most isolated culture, stubbornly resists the kind of regimentation that the "plain English" advocates enshrine. There will be no academic Esperanto. But there is certainly no reason to despair.

The present divisions are not the only possible ones (as the many past reforms of writing instruction illustrate). And the greatest obstacle to reshaping and rearranging our current divisions may well be the myth that they do not really exist or that they would soon disappear if only everyone would learn to write properly (or naturally or critically or what you will). Only when academia confronts its confusion of tongues and its myth of transience can the slow work of translation and transformation begin.

## THE TRIUMPH OF SPECIALIZATION

Bringing these different rhetorical and pedagogical traditions into the light of historical and rhetorical analysis will mean thinking of writing and its instruction as part of a larger debate about who will learn—and do—what in the postmodern culture(s) we are creating. For as we approach the end of another century, it is sobering to remember that modern society was “revolutionized” not only by positivist philosophy and industrial technology but also by managers, scientists, and bureaucrats wielding the new technologies of the word: the typewriter, the Linotype, the mimeograph, as well as the pedagogical and analytical tools to cement their position through writing. And the new postindustrial society is being formed through another “revolution” in writing: the electronic office and factory and school. Now we must consider how traditions of writing instruction will shape (and be shaped by) the society that they create.